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Warning to Dog Owners

SUMMARY

More than one percent of all emergency department visits are secondary to dog bites. Larger and more aggressive breeds of dogs cause most of the morbidity from dog bites, and most victims are bitten by the family dog. Four hundred and twenty patients presenting to an emergency department with dog bite wounds were studied in 1982. Forty-six percent of the patients were bitten by German shepherds; 80% of these dogs were owned by the patients' families. Twenty-one patients (five percent) had serious injuries requiring hospitalization. Although large breeds make good guard dogs, they also are a threat to household members, especially children; 35% of the victims were under ten years old. Physicians should advise parents not to leave children alone with dogs. (Can Fam Physician 1984; 30:1056-1058)

SOMMAIRE

Plus de 1% de toutes les visites dans les salles d'urgence sont la conséquence de morsures de chiens. Les races de chiens gros et agressifs sont responsables de la plus grande partie de la morbidité imputée aux morsures, et la plupart des victimes ont été mordues par le chien familial. En 1982, on a étudié 420 patients qui se sont présentés à un service d'urgence pour morsures de chiens. Les bergers allemands ont mordu 46% des patients; 80% de ces chiens étaient la propriété familiale. Vingt-et-un patients (5%) ont présenté des blessures suffisamment sérieuses pour nécessiter une hospitalisation. Même si les gros chiens sont excellentes comme chiens de garde, ils représentent néanmoins une menace pour les membres de la maisonnée, spécialement les enfants. Trente-cinq pourcent des victimes avaient moins de 10 ans. Les médecins devraient aviser les parents de ne pas laisser les enfants seuls avec les chiens.

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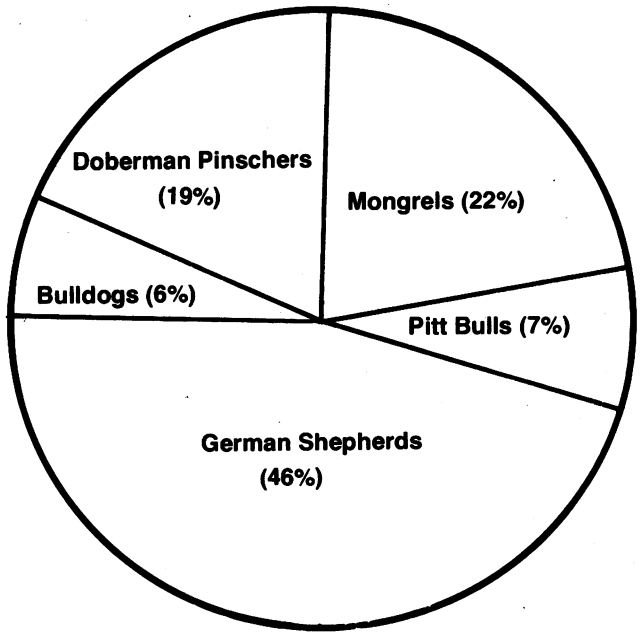
BITE WOUNDS ARE common injuries and are usually due to dog bites. More than 80% of all reported bites are due to dogs,[1] and more than one percent of all emergency department visits are secondary to dog bites.[2] Even so, possibly only ten percent of all dog bites are actually reported to the authorities.[2]

The larger and more aggressive breeds of dogs contribute to most of the morbidity from dog bites. One study showed that although the German shepherd comprised only 22% of the dog population of Baltimore, Maryland, 45% of the 44,000 dog bites reported there from 1970-1976 were caused by them.[3] Seventy-five percent of these dogs were either owned by the victim or by a neighbor. In a similar study in New York City, 78% of victims were bitten by their own dog.[4]

Winkler[5] has given the only report of deaths due to dog bites. During 1974-1975, 11 deaths from dog bites were reported in the United States. This estimate is probably low, as it did not include patients who died of infection, sepsis or other complica-

Fig. 2.

Type of dog vs. percentage of bites.



tions. Nine of the patients were under seven years old, and one was over 75. The head and neck were the most common targets. Most of the dogs were owned by the victims' families. None of the dogs had rabies.[5]

This study examines patients presenting with dog bite injuries to a major inner city medical centre in Los Angeles over one year.

Materials and Methods

Four hundred and twenty patients with dog bite wounds were studied over 1982. These patients presented to a major inner city medical centre emergency department. Epidemiological as well as clinical data were collected; these data have been presented previously.[6, 7] This article will discuss further data on the danger of family dogs.

Results and Discussion

Patients' ages are shown in Figure 1. The largest group of patients (35%) was under ten years old; 50% of all bite victims were aged one to 20 years. Children are less able to defend themselves from a large dog, and these patients also had the most serious injuries.

The types of dogs that bit the victims are presented in Figure 2. Ninety-nine percent of the dogs were large species, including German shepherds, Pitt bulls, bulldogs, and large mongrels. Eighty percent of the mongrels were strays, but of the known breeds and purebred dogs, most were owned by the victim's family. Significantly, German shepherds caused 46% of the bites, and 80% of these dogs were owned by the patients or by the patients' families. Also, 60% of the Doberman pinschers that were identified were owned by the patients or by the patients' families. Thirty percent of the bites occurred in the patient's own home (see Figure 3). Ninety-eight percent of the patients stated that the attack was unprovoked.

Twenty-one patients (five percent) had serious injuries requiring hospitalization. One group of hospitalized patients had extensive lacerations or avulsions involving tendons, eyelids or lacrimal apparatus, and required surgery. Another group had serious

Fig. 1.
Percentage of dog bites in each age group.

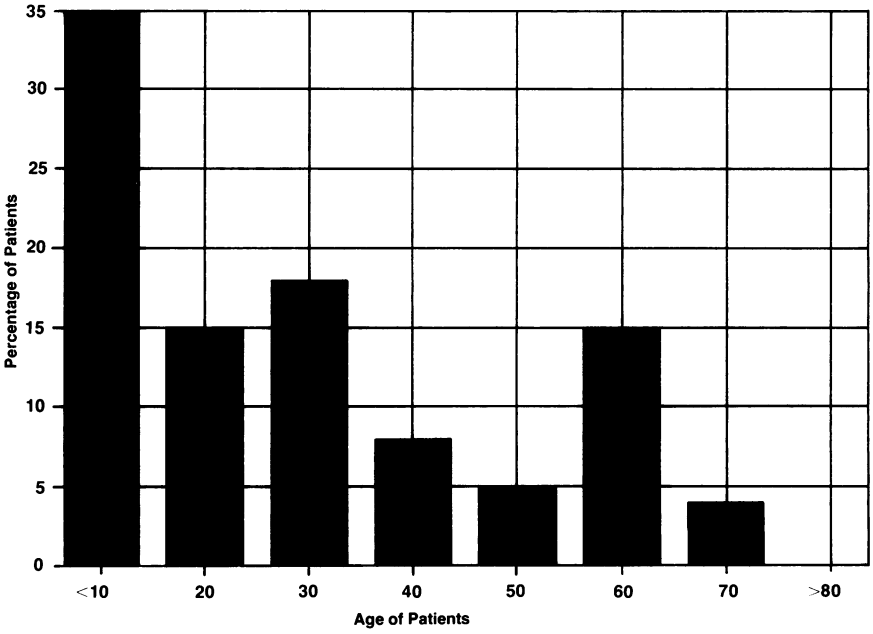


Fig. 3
Place where bite occurred.

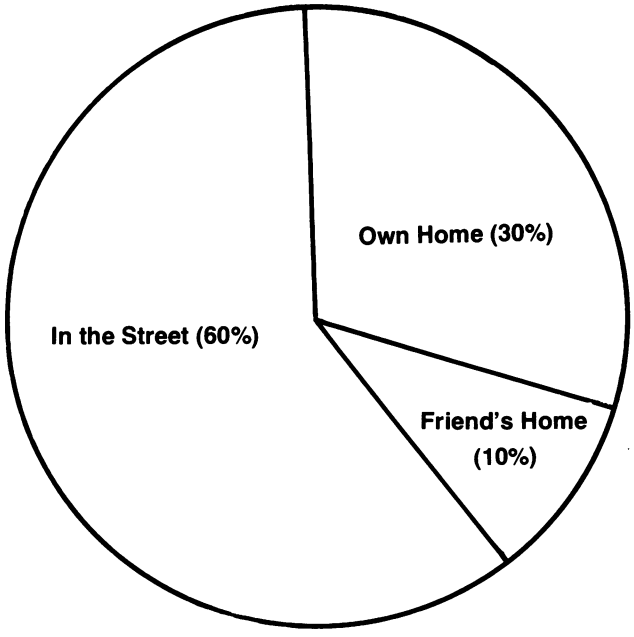


Fig. 4
Who owned dogs that caused serious injury.

infections or septicemia. There were no deaths in this study. Of significance is the fact that 80% of those patients with serious bites received them from their own dogs (see Figure 4).

Conclusion

Although large breeds of dogs make good guard dogs, they are also a threat to household members, especially to children. Very serious injury, longterm morbidity and deformity, and even death, can result from the family dog. This study shows that most of the serious dog bite injuries were actually inflicted by the family dog.

Those who own large dogs may not realize the danger to their children and possibly even to themselves. The usually friendly family dog has been documented to attack family members for no apparent reason.[8] Parents should not leave children alone with dogs, and an adult should stay between a dog and a child at all times. Physicians should be aware of these facts in order to properly advise patients who own dogs. ◉

References

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